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ABSTRACT

Three writing assignments not only gave students the opportunity to practice various rhetorical approaches in the assignments, but also provided students a learning opportunity and a chance to explore their own attitudes towards the problems and issues raised by the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) crisis. The first assignment involved the exploration of misconceptions regarding AIDS, and required research and the use of the comparative rhetorical approach in a 500-word theme. Students learned that knowledge about the disease eliminated both prejudices and misconceptions. The second assignment involved writing about any controversial aspect of the AIDS crisis. Students were required to incorporate into their paper 5 words from a list of 18 words suggesting an emotional response. The words most frequently used were "disease," "victim," and "prevention," yet none were used in association with prejudicial attitudes. The final assignment was a reaction paper to the film, "Imagine This," an 18-minute documentary interviewing college students infected with the HIV virus. Immediately after viewing the film, students wrote a two-pronged paper. In the majority of cases, students' initial reaction was anger, followed by compassion--nevertheless, some prejudices did come out. (Instructions for the reaction paper and the list of 18 words are attached.) (SR)

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SEARCHING FOR OBJECTIVITY AND PREJUDICE IN WRITING ABOUT AIDS

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SEARCHING FOR OBJECTIVITY AND PREJUDICE IN WRITING ABOUT AIDS

Gerald F. Luboff

The following paper was presented at the 1991 CCCC Conference in Boston, Massachusetts. It was part of a roundtable format, suggested in order to facilitate an open discussion and hear what other faculty were doing in their classrooms with regard to writing assignments about AIDS.

The original title proposed for our session was "AIDS in the Writing Classroom: Taking off the Blinders." The suggestion here is that all too many students, even in the recent past, had only "generalized" ideas regarding the disease rather than "specific" ones. And it seemed important that students in particular needed to be aware of "specifics." The "why" was noted by Dr. Richard Keeling of the University of Virginia.

Dr. Keeling, in a lecture recently presented at the college where I teach, noted that the major trend with regard to HIV infection in the next decade (that is, the 1990's) will be a decline seen in numbers of men who have had sex with other men, but a significant rise in the numbers of adolescents and young adults. At present, 65% of the world's cases of infection have been transmitted by vaginal intercourse, 15% by anal intercourse, 10% by intravenous needle-sharing, and 10% perinatally.

Why this tendency? There are a couple of related reasons: Number one--the "It can't happen to me" attitude; that is, students and other young adults often have a sense of their own invulnerability. And number two--the stereotypes they have of

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people infected with the HIV virus: gays, lesbians, and intravenous drug users. (The gay-bashing of the 1980's, which has continued into the present decade, was often a direct result of the stereotypes.)

This lack of concrete knowledge about the disease, however minimal this lack of knowledge might be, along with the stereotypes that people often had, prompted me to have my freshman students confront and examine their own personal feelings as well as the issues raised by the presence of this disease. Thus the title of my presentation: "Searching for Objectivity and Prejudice in Writing About AIDS." I decided to apply "Three R's"--Research, Reaction, and Rhetorical Approaches--to the assignments given, using these methods or techniques to determine and explore the attitudes of my students--attitudes which I expected would reveal both objectivity and prejudice.

The first assignment involved the exploration of misconceptions regarding AIDS, but the students had to do some research in approaching the assignment. Specifically, they were asked to find a recent article (that is, one that appeared within the past year) in a newspaper or magazine, and the article had to disprove two misconceptions that they--or those they knew--had regarding AIDS. In addition, since they were to concern themselves with misconceptions, it was obvious that they would be using the comparative rhetorical approach, specifically contrast, this to be done in the usual 500 word theme.

There were approximately ninety students involved in this assignment, and I was pleased to see that there weren't any

virulent prejudices, though there were perhaps a few prejudices, nevertheless, regarding homosexuals. For example, both John and Michelle believed that AIDS was a disease only of drug users and homosexuals. Vicki believed that only gay men, not gay women, could contract the virus. Sergio, in fact, believed that "gays automatically got the virus."

However, I found that my students learned, through their research, that knowledge about the disease eliminated both prejudices and misconceptions: for example, that even casual contact with an infected individual (sitting next to that person in class) could cause one to become infected; that AIDS is really a problem only of the inner cities, not the suburbs or rural areas; that a heterosexual teen-ager could not become infected; and that if one were to become infected, AZT was a guaranteed and automatic cure.

Assignment number two involved writing about any controversial aspect of the AIDS crisis. We spent a full class period raising issues and questions, ultimately narrowing the areas under discussion into workable topics and/or questions. For example, Should someone who has tested positive for the HIV virus be required to carry an ID card to that effect? Should someone in the medical profession who has tested positive be allowed to continue his or her practice? Should husbands or wives who have tested positive be allowed to have children?

However, in writing their papers, they had to incorporate five of the eighteen words which I gave to them. [See Sheet A.] All of these words inherently suggested an emotional response, and I

was interested to see what words would be most frequently chosen and how those words would be used. Only thirty students were involved in this particular assignment, so my findings may not be 100% conclusive. However, the following words used most frequently by the students were disease, victim, and prevention (each fifteen times or more), yet none of the words on the list were used in association with prejudicial attitudes. In fact, just about everyone exhibited an understanding of the problems and showed compassion towards those who had been infected with the HIV virus--a very positive discovery on my part! In her paper on AIDS testing in the workplace, Diana noted that as a result of sometimes vague and inconclusive methods of testing for AIDS, an innocent person can appear guilty and thus be discriminated against. Yet another student, however, in a well-written paper presenting a strong argument against allowing doctors who test positive to continue their medical practice did perhaps reveal a subconscious prejudice towards gays: He understands the plight of the doctors, he states, "whether they contracted the virus through infected needles or homosexual contact; yet he never suggests the possibility of their having contracted the disease through heterosexual contact, though heterosexual was a word which might have been selected from the list.

The final assignment, a reaction paper [Sheet B], was the most successful of the three in that the students were not given a chance to think about the immediate subject and thereby have a chance to "color" their true feelings. Instructions concerning the assignment were passed out to the classes before they saw the

film Imagine This, an eighteen-minute documentary (produced and directed in 1989 by Laurie Vollen, M.D.) involving interviews with a number of college students (gay, straight, and bisexual) who had been infected with the HIV virus. Then immediately after viewing the film, they were required to write their two-pronged paper.

What I found was this: In the majority of cases, the initial reaction was anger, followed by compassion for people with AIDS. However, the anger was multidirectional: sometimes it was towards the people with AIDS themselves, if it were discovered that they had not used proper precautions during sex or if they were IV drug-users; sometimes it was towards a capricious universe that allowed this disease to exist; sometimes it was specifically towards God Himself for permitting this to happen--both to a specific individual and to society in general.

In most cases, however, the students were compassionate and stated that they would not abandon their friends or relatives who contracted the disease. Nevertheless, perhaps because the students were not given time to "adjust" their initial reactions or because they had to think about the AIDS crisis in terms of individual people rather than society in general, some prejudices did come out. A number of students, for example, still felt that one could contract AIDS through casual contact, didn't believe the doctors or those in the government who stated otherwise, and therefore wanted to avoid anyone who had tested positive for the AIDS virus. A few students who were otherwise sympathetic towards "innocent" victims of AIDS stated that those who share needles for drug use "almost deserve to get AIDS." Only one student directed

his anger specifically towards the homosexual community, stating that gays "by rights deserve to get AIDS." He added that only "one guy in the film looked 'normal'," though ironically this was a gay male, not a straight male. The rest of them, including the married student, he stated, looked gay. This student, in fact, refused to complete the second part of the assignment because he found the subject distasteful, could not imagine ever knowing someone who had AIDS, and maintained that he was "by no means a homosexual."

On the whole, these writing exercises were beneficial because they not only gave the students the opportunity to practice various rhetorical approaches in the assignments, but they also gave them the opportunity to explore their own attitudes towards the problems and issues raised by the AIDS crisis.

Composition I Professor Luboff

REACTION PAPER

The film you are about to see deals with real people, not characters in a short story, novel, or play. All are involved with a global, yet personal, situation; and they are very aware of what they have to say and of how they feel. In an approximately 300-350 word paper, one that is well-organized and clearly presented, first discuss your reaction to these people—or to any one of them—and the problem they face. Then broaden the situation to include a reaction to the following: You have just discovered that a member of your immediate family, or a boyfriend or girlfriend, best friend, the person sitting next to you in class, or a close co-worker faces the same problem. Your reaction may be objective or irrational; you may show anger, compassion, or a combination of many feelings. The important thing, however, is to express yourself honestly.

English Composition I Professor Luboff

INNOCENT	HOMOSEXUAL
GUILTY	HETEROSEXUAL
DISEASE	ACCEPTANCE
UNDERSTANDING	REJECTION
PREVENTION	GAY
QUARANTINE	STRAIGHT
VICTIM	SAFE
COMPASSION	UNSAFE
OUTCAST	ANGER